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'Brockovich' enjoyable despite limited plot and recycled story

By Samuel McKewon
Senior editor

Julia Roberts deserves her own time zone after "Erin Brockovich," a movie with a plot so flimsy and predictable that it soars no higher than any TV-movie-of-the-week.

But there is a difference in the Lisa Hartmans of the world and Roberts, besides the \$19 million gap in their price tags.

Some of the difference is Roberts' show-stopping looks - and she looks every bit as good here as she did 10 years before in "Pretty Woman." That the title character, a down-on-her-luck law clerk who stumbles onto a huge case wears outfits that are drop dead trumpy only works in Roberts' favor.

The rest belongs to director Steven Soderbergh, talented enough to make a very overworked genre - the court docudrama - triumph grandly through the power of his slightly off-kilter camera.

Soderbergh is the first director (though certainly not the last) to create scenes around Roberts, both in pacing and camera setup. The camera knows her in this film, studies her up close, shoots her from every angle imaginable. This is the director of "Sex, Lies and Videotape" at the height of his game, and though "Brockovich" falls short of his previous efforts, "Out of Sight" and "The Limey," his style still doesn't miss a beat. It shows that great movies can

be constructed out of stale plots.

And this one is stale. Important, yes, and true, but stale. Brockovich is twice divorced, and she's saddled with three kids. Fresh out of her parents' home, she makes her way west, where she blows job interviews (Qualifications? She has kids. Nothing more.) and gets her car twisted in an accident.

She'll lose the lawsuit but gain a future employer from her lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney), an ambulance chaser of sorts who keeps his practice barely above water.

Though her outfits - Erin's breasts are stuffed into her tops, her heels are four miles high - are cause for gossip, she can work, and is smart and begins to investigate the Pacific Gas and Electric Water Plant that has caused the deaths and illnesses of hundreds in tiny Hinkley, Calif.

Details remain pretty thin on the case, and there isn't much doubt (because it's already happened) that the plaintiffs will eventually emerge victorious. Rather, the movie chooses to focus on Brockovich, and Roberts earns her paycheck - at first defeated, then defiant, then proud.

Through her job and the relationships with her children and her lover (long-haired Aaron Eckhart, reasonably subdued) there is a gritty strength in Roberts' performance, wisely staying away from wild. But when she does get tizzed up, there's few better to scream "I ain't talkin to you, bitch," through their big lips.

'Destination' not worth visiting

By Samuel McKewon
Senior editor

"Final Destination" is a movie made for one reason: to make another "Final Destination," with a destination a little more final than the first movie, which certainly wasn't meant to be the final destination of this series.

There is no other way to explain it - a 90-minute teen horror film with no greater intention than to finish with a poker-faced ending, along the way discarding an entire subplot that serves as a 30-minute red herring. "Final Destination" has the opportunity to be

a better movie a couple of times but opts for a potential franchise.

Its plot contains reasonably heady stuff - death, psychic premonitions, grief over loved ones lost - and a cast of relative unknowns in the teen acting world (the only recognizable one to me is Ali Larter, who played the whipped cream girl in "Varsity Blues" last year). A few of them, including lead Devon Sawa, have potential, and they might have made a decent movie had the creators given them the chance.

Sawa's character, 17-year-old Alex, is at the middle of a cosmic

Erin Brockovich

STARRING: Julia Roberts
DIRECTOR: Steven Soderbergh
RATED: R (language, Julia's outfits)
GRADE: B+
FIVE WORDS: "Brockovich", Roberts are guilty pleasures.

And though the movie follows a pattern of Brockovich either fuming at her superiors or feeling the pain of the plaintiffs, it's a good pattern, and Soderbergh does just enough with the desert landscape to make it seem like a lost playground for fate, which finally discovers all the improprieties of the landowners.

There are a few awkward stretches toward the end, and the rhythm gets interrupted. "Erin Brockovich" doesn't say much for unpretty women, as it unabashedly flaunts the ability of a great pair of legs to make men swoon and treats it like an admirable trait.

To spit in the wind of correctness and movie sensibility: So what? "Erin Brockovich" dares us to hate it, and we pale in the challenge. It's a testament to Roberts and Soderbergh that cheap, docile entertainment can still mean a little something. It's like the 1980s and its guilty, guilty pleasures all over again.

Final Destination

STARS: None, really
DIRECTOR: James Wong
RATING: R (Airplane disaster, choking disaster, other disasters that include a lot of blood, language)
GRADE: D+
FIVE WORDS: This isn't the "Final Destination".

storm after envisioning the fiery crash of an airplane he is about to board to Paris for a class trip. Six others on the trip, either by choice or security force, are escorted off the plane with Alex. Left behind, they watch the plane explode.

But death doesn't like to be escaped very much, and soon after, black clouds and shiny household appliances menace the survivors, setting the stage for a gruesome choking and two bus disasters, among other fatal acts.

Included is a useless side story with the FBI, who somehow think Alex had something to do with the original plane explosion, and several borderline boring monologues from Sawa and Larter, who plays a girl named Clear, about the murkiness of fate.

Much of "Final Destination" is filler for the action/death scenes, little more. The movie could've worked quite well, I suppose, as a 30-minute fictional documentary on the various ways one can be brutally stripped of life. There is an audience for that sort of material.

But director James Wong (who used to work on "The X-Files" TV show) is a sadistic little devil; he makes us wait through long periods of character development before the decapitations. Where's "Faces of Death" when you need it?

Answer: Right here in "Final Destination," only to see the full act, check out "An Even More Final Destination" in two years and "We're Serious, This is Really the Final Destination" in four. That's what you're supposed to do.

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